

Instructions for our Simplified Process for Making 3' x 6' Sleeping Mats from Plastic Grocery Sacks

FaithWestwood United Methodist Church
CareMAT Ministry
Omaha, NE

INTRODUCTION: At FaithWestwood our CareMAT ministry is truly a church-wide endeavor. Just about everyone in our congregation, their family and friends, participates in collecting the plastic grocery sacks we use.

Then, a team of 25-30 volunteers gathers for several hours three times a month to process the bags into “plarn” (plastic yarn). (Other volunteers also work at home to prepare the bags and make the plarn.) Only a handful of volunteers actually crochet the mats, as it takes a large team to prepare the large number of bags (approximately 1,000) required for each mat. So, if you or your organization is interested in this project, please know that:

1. We have spent several years refining and simplifying the various steps shown in other YouTube videos and website instructional guides. We began with those instructions, but found the process impossibly complicated and the final product less than ideal – especially when our goal is to be able to create a large quantity of mats each year.
2. Not everyone involved in this ministry needs to be able to crochet – in fact very few do! Most of our volunteers “specialize” in just one of the steps below.

IMPORTANT NOTE: We do not believe that anyone can accurately follow this process just from the written instructions. Please be sure to read the instructions as you are watching the companion YouTube video.

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A. Collecting the Bags

Our entire congregation, their families and friends participate in collecting and donating the bags used to make the mats. We have two collection barrels in prominent places in the church where bags are deposited regularly by congregation members.

B. Selecting the Bags

Only plastic grocery bags (12" x 14") are suitable for this process.

(Larger and/or stiffer plastic department store bags, produce bags, dry cleaning bags, and newspaper bags are not appropriate.)

C. Sort/separate bags by store/color.

It is easier to cut bags from the same store more precisely. Also, keeping the cut strips sorted by color allows the person making the mats to design a color pattern for the mat.

D. Flattening Bags

Flatten bags as flat as possible, following steps 1-4 below:

- 1.** Make sure that the bag is right-side out. (Otherwise it is impossible to flatten the bag properly with the gusset folded in.)
- 2.** Using the bag handles, shake the bag to open, straighten and remove air. (Most frequently the bags we receive are crumpled.)
- 3.** Place bag on the table and flatten from the bottom seam out, straightening the handle as needed.
- 4.** Straighten the bottom seam, fold the gussets in, and holding on to the bottom seam and the straightened handle, completely flatten each side of the bag.

Repeat steps 1-4 (above) for multiple bags of same color/type, creating stacks of ten (10) identical, flattened bags.



E. Cutting the Bags

You will need the following:

- rotary cutter and self-healing cutting mat
- 6" quilting guide

1. Take stack of 10 flattened identical bags and ensure that they are lined up at the bottom.
2. Using the rotary cutter and guide remove bottom ½", making sure that you remove all 10 bottom seams.
3. Using the 6" guide, cut two 6 inch strips from the bag.
4. Discard bottoms and handle scraps. (***We take these back to the supermarket to the plastic bag recycle bin.***)
5. Keep cut strips sorted by color and place them in a bag of the same type to be used by those who will crochet the mats.

Note: We strongly urge you **NOT** to make your strips smaller than 6". If you do, the finished product is much thinner and tighter and not as comfortable for sleeping.

F. Looping The Strips Together

1. To attach the strips together to create the plarn (***plastic yarn***) for crocheting, take two strips and loop one around the end of the other, loop and pull. (***This is not as simple as it sounds, and is difficult to describe in words. Please watch the video illustration of this step carefully for the best way to do this.***)

Note: After the strips are looped together DO NOT roll into balls, but fold them into bundles of 20-30 connected strips. (***Rolling into balls crushes the strips and the finished mat will be less thick and fluffy and thus, less comfortable to sleep on.***)



G. Crocheting the Mats

Note: It is very important to understand that not all of our volunteers crochet the mats. In fact, the majority of our volunteers are involved in preparing the bags (Steps A-E) to be given to those who do the crocheting. (These instructions assume you already know how to single crochet.)

1. Open a bundle of the plarn created in Step F above and make a knot at the end of the plarn.
2. To create the first row, using the Size Q crochet hook create a 3 foot long chain (approximately 40 stitches.)
3. To create the next and all subsequent rows, single crochet the EXACT same number of stitches as in your original 3 foot chain.
4. Continue to single crochet the same number of stitches in each row until the mat is 6 feet long. (Stitches which are loose rather than tight will create a thicker, softer mat for sleeping.)

H. Making the Carrying Straps for Each Mat/Attaching a Carrying Strap to Each Mat

Note: We quickly learned that while many of our mats go to shelters which serve those who are homeless, many are also distributed directly to homeless individuals living on the streets. A rolled mat with a carrying strap makes the mat much more user-friendly for those carrying them.

1. Using 30 circular strips, loop each together (*as above*) into one long piece of plarn.
2. Using this one long piece of plarn, make a chain, using the Size Q crochet hook. The finished chain should be approximately 3 yards long. This is the strap.
3. Roll the finished 3' foot x 6' mat.
4. Attach the strap to outside left corner of the mat, about 6 inches in from the left edge, catching it through the top 2 rows. Double knot that end of the strap.
5. Thread the strap through the remaining loop at the end of the double knot.
6. Wrap the strap around the rolled mat 6" past the double knot and pull tight. Then create a loop by sliding a piece of the remaining strap under the strap you have just wrapped around the mat.
7. Take the remaining strap and pull it completely through the loop and pull tight.
8. Lay the remaining strap across the mat to the right side of the mat, stopping about 6" in from the right edge.
9. Holding the strap in place 6" in from the right edge of the mat, wrap the remaining strap all the way around the mat, catching the strap you are holding in place. Secure with a knot.

Note: This process is difficult to put into words, but actually very simple to do. The video will make the steps above very clear!

I. Blessing the Mats

Our CareMATers ministry team always begins their work sessions with prayer. In addition, those working on the mats at home pray for the recipients of the mats as they work. Then, several times a year, we bless the mats in worship. Members of the congregation extend their arms and pray together the following blessing prayer:

**God of all comfort,
may your blessing be upon these mats,
comforting all who will receive them.
May these mats be a safe haven,
a sacred place of security and well-being,
and may those who receive these gifts of prayer and love
be cradled in hope and healing, kept in joy, graced with peace,
and enfolded in your love.
In Christ's name we pray, Amen.**



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